NAXOS

DDD

8.553591

TIPPETT

Piano Concerto

Ritual Dances

(from The Midsummer Marriage)

Benjamin Frith, Piano

BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra • George Hurst

Michael Tippett (1905-1998)

Ritual Dances from The Midsummer Marriage • Piano Concerto

Michael Tippett was born in London on 2nd January, 1905, the second son of Henry William Tippett (a retired lawyer) and Isabel Clementina Binny Kemp. Tippett's father was of Cornish origin, his mother from Kent. He studied for his BMus degree at the Royal College of Music between 1923 and 1928: composition with Charles Wood and C. H. Kitson, piano with Aubin Raymar and conducting with Malcolm Sargent and Adrian Boult.

His creative maturity came relatively late (he destroyed all of his early works), with his first acknowledged works being the *String Quartet No.1* (1934-35, revised 1943) and *Piano Sonata No.1* (1936-37), this after a further period of study at the Royal College of Music under R.O. Morris. It was not until the première of his oratorio *A Child of Our Time* (1939-41) on 19th March, 1944, that Tippett's name became known to the general music public.

By this time he was Director of Music at Morley College (a position once held by Gustav Holst), a post he held from 1940 to 1951. Under Tippett's direction Morley College became one of London's most important centres of musical activity. As well as directing the College choir he also organised many ground breaking concerts of both early and contemporary music, including Tallis, Purcell (thus helping to instigate the revival of interest in Purcell's music), Monteverdi, Stravinsky, Hindemith and Britten. These concerts featured such future stars as Peter Pears, Alfred Deller and the Amadeus Quartet.

The year before the première of *A Child of Our Time*, 1943, had been a difficult one for Tippett. In 1940 he had joined the pacifist organization, the Peace Pledge Union, and had applied for provisional registration as a conscientious objector. When he refused to comply with the conditions of his non-combatant military duties, arguing that he was serving the community as a musician, he was sentenced to the minimum term of three months' imprisonment in Wormwood Scrubs.

From 1951 onwards Tippett was able to give up teaching to concentrate entirely on composition, supplementing his income by broadcasting for the BBC's *Third Programme*.

Tippett's operas formed the backbone of his mature works: *The Midsummer Marriage* (1947-52), *King Priam* (1958-61), *The Knot Garden* (1966-70), *The Ice Break* (1973-76) and *New Year* (1986-88). His other works include four symphonies, five string quartets and three concertos. Thanks in part to recordings of his music, his international profile (particularly in the USA) started to grow from his sixties onwards. Several major commissions came from America, such as the *Fourth Symphony* (1976-77) for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, *The Mask of Time* (1980-82) for the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and *Byzantium* (1989-90) again for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Carnegie Hall.

Throughout his career Tippett was the recipient of many honours, including a CBE (1959), a knighthood (1966), a Companion of Honour (1979) and finally the Order of Merit (1983). Other awards included the gold medal of the Royal Philharmonic Society and honorary membership of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Michael Tippett died on 8th January, 1998, one of only a handful of composers this century to achieve both high public and critical acclaim.

Having completed his *First Symphony* in 1945, Tippett then spent the next six years grappling with the problems of writing his first opera; the result was The *Midsummer Marriage*, produced at Covent Garden in January 1955. The libretto, written by Tippett himself, concerns the problems faced by two pairs of lovers, Mark and Jenifer, and Jack and Bella, that have to be overcome before they can marry. It was at the suggestion of the Swiss conductor Paul Sacher that Tippett turned the four *Ritual Dances* from *Acts II* and

III of the opera into a concert suite. Sacher conducted the suite's première on 13th February, 1953, in Basle, a full two years before the opera itself received its première. They have subsequently become one of Tippett's best-known works.

In the three dances in *Act II*, female animals (hound, otter and hawk) are shown hunting males (hare, fish and bird), with each respective dance associated with its own element and season (*The Earth in Autumn*; *The Waters in Winter*; *The Air in Spring*). The climactic fourth dance in *Act III*, *Fire in Summer*, symbolizes rebirth and human love, and is performed before Mark and Jenifer and the Chorus.

The sequence of the dances is as follows: *Allegro molto* opening, slow movement (*Adagio tranquillo*), scherzo (*Allegro grazioso vivace*) and finale (*Più mosso: allegro moderato*), whilst the tonality shifts from A minor to the final triumphant A major by way of E flat minor and D major.

Written between 1953 and 1955, the *Piano Concerto* shares several characteristics with *The Midsummer Marriage*, notably its lyricism and the importance, both melodically and harmonically, of the interval of a fourth. It was first performed in Birmingham on 30th October, 1956 by Louis Kentner and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Rudolf Schwarz. Somewhat disconcertingly, the original soloist, Julius Katchen, considered the solo part unplayable and pulled out. (This calls to mind a remark attributed to the composer Arnold Schoenberg upon being told that his *Violin Concerto* required a soloist with six fingers: 'Very well, I can wait'). In fact the replacement, Kentner, was able to perform the work from memory.

Tippett stated that the *Piano Concerto* 'proceeds directly out of the world of *The Midsummer Marriage*. The music is rich, linear, lyrical, as in that opera. But it had its precise moment of conception years before when listening to a rehearsal of Beethoven's *Fourth Piano Concerto* as played by Gieseking on his return to England after the war'.

Formally the concerto follows a traditional pattern: the first movement (*Allegro non troppo*) is in sonata form, whilst the third movement (*Vivace*) is a *rondo* which, unusually, gives the main theme to the orchestra rather than to the soloist. Instead the soloist introduces each new episode that comes between the repetitions of the orchestral *rondo*. The form of the central slow movement (*Molto lento e tranquillo*) is decidedly less classical and essentially rhapsodic in character.

Tippett's stated intention when composing the *Piano Concerto* was to make the piano sing – when one listens to the work, and to the slow movement's arabesques in particular, one appreciates that he has succeeded brilliantly.

Peter Quinn

Benjamin Frith

Benjamin Frith has had a distinguished career. A pupil of Fanny Waterman, he won, at the age of fourteen, the British National Concerto Competition, followed by the Mozart Memorial Prize and joint top prize in 1986 in the Italian Busoni International Piano Competition. This was followed in 1989 by a Gold Medal and First Prize in the Arthur Rubinstein Piano Master Competition. Benjamin Frith enjoys a busy international career, with engagements in the United States and throughout Europe, as a soloist and recitalist, with festival appearances at Sheffield, Aldeburgh, Harrogate, Kuhmo, Bolzano, Savannah, Pasadena and Hong Kong and an Edinburgh Festival début in 1992. His recordings for Naxos include a release of piano music by Schumann, followed by the two Mendelssohn *Piano Concertos* and the *Third Piano Concerto* of Rachmaninov.

BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra

The BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra is recognised as one of Britain's most adventurous orchestras, whose repertoire includes a broad cross-section of the music of our own time as well as the great music of the past. This spirit of adventure is reflected in its recordings of neglected Romantic repertoire, contemporary music by composers as diverse as Macmillan, Tan Dun and Detlev Glanert, and in its concert policy which includes many special projects. Formed in 1935, the orchestra has become one of the most creative and innovative bodies in Scottish musical life, with an important rôle in the Edinburgh International Festival since its inception, and a commitment to take orchestral music throughout Scotland, visiting as many as ten Scottish towns in a season. The orchestra regularly commissions new music from Scottish composers and from leading composers abroad. Outside Scotland, it appears every season at the BBC Promenade Concerts in London, and has toured throughout Europe and to the Far East and Canada. In 1996 the Finnish conductor Osmo Vänskä was appointed Chief Conductor and under his direction the orchestra is enjoying unparalleled success.

George Hurst

George Hurst was born in 1926 in Edinburgh of Russian and Romanian parentage and won early distinction in Canada as a composer while a student at the Royal Conservatory in Toronto. At the the of 21 he was appointed professor of composition at the Peabody Institute of Baltimore and from 1950 to 1955 was concurrently conductor of the Peabody Conservatory Orchestra and the Symphony Orchestra of York, Pennsylvania, studying during this period with Pierre Monteux. Encouraged by Myra Hess to return to England he made his London début in 1953 with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, with whom he served as Assistant Conductor until his appointment as Principal Conductor of the BBC Northern Orchestra, now the BBC Philharmonic. From 1968 to 1974 he served as artistic advisor to the Western Orchestral Society, which controls the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra and Bournemouth Sinfonietta. George Hurst has conducted all the major orchestras of the United Kingdom and Ireland, serving as Principal Conductor from 1990 to 1993 of the newly reconstituted National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland, and has made guest appearances with many of the most distinguished orchestras of Europe.

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STEREO

DDD

Sir Michael

TIPPETT

(1905-1998)

Playing Time 62:36

Piano Concerto • Ritual Dances

Benjamin Frith, Piano

BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra • George Hurst

Ritual Dances from The Midsummer Marriage 24:46

1 Allegro molto –
Adagio tranquillo –
Allegro grazioso vivace –
Più mosso: allegro moderato

Piano Concerto 37:41

2 Allegro non troppo 18:09

3 Molto lente e tranquillo 10:17

4 Vivace 9:13

Sir Michael Tippett became one of the most internationally renowned British composers of the 20th century, though this recognition came late in his life. He developed a very personal and progressive style of composition, taking the melodic concept into uncharted territory. It was this fresh approach that made him particularly popular in North America, and gave him the impetus to embark on many large-scale works, including a series of operas. His most significant and successful was *The Midsummer Marriage*, an unconventional love story that contained four very attractive dances. They were later to form a suite that has gained considerable popularity. The *Piano Concerto* came from the same year, the composer's stated intention being to make the piano sing. It is a virtuoso score whose roots are in the traditions of the Romantic concerto.

Recorded at Govan Town Hall, Glasgow, Scotland on 9th and 10th October, 1995.
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